

New Armenian party poses greatest challenge in years

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After several months of careful preparation, a new political opposition force has emerged in Armenia -- Civil Contract. With fresh faces and more sophisticated tactics, it offers a fresh alternative to many of the older, but largely discredited parties. For the first time in Armenian political history, an opposition force has engaged in an innovative grassroots effort to build a political party from the bottom up, carefully crafting a party platform and creating a strategy to oppose the government based on policies, rather than personalities.

What next

Amid a wave of growing civic activism and protests, the timing may be especially propitious for a new political opposition to gather momentum. Although the challenge will be to consolidate its appeal beyond the opposition's traditional political and geographical base of support, its novel and fresh approach offers the public an attractive alternative to the country's closed and rigid political system. Moreover, against a backdrop of mounting activism and social protests over a widening range of issues, this new opposition force seems well positioned to become the most serious challenge to the existing parties in many years.

Analysis

After several months of careful preparation and deliberation, a new political opposition force emerged on December 9, at a public meeting to present the new Civil Contract. The presentation of a detailed political platform, covering a number of public policy issues, is the first step in forming a new political party.

Unlike Armenia's other established parties, on both the opposition and the pro-government side, the party is not organised around a strong personality. Equally impressive is the fact that its public leadership is notable for its diversity, in terms of age, gender and political experience.

In the light of the government's litany of mis-steps and scandals, exacerbated by its controversial decision to join the Russian-dominated Customs Union rather than deepening ties with the EU (see [RUSSIA/CAUCASUS: West will gain as Moscow loses grip - September 5, 2013](#)), its policy-focused strategy offers a potent new weapon that the Armenian authorities are neither well positioned nor well prepared to counter or confront effectively.

A seasoned leadership

The seven-member board of Civil Contract is led by two prominent opposition figures: Nikol Pashinyan, a sitting member of the Armenian parliament; and Sasun Mikaelyan, former mayor of Armenia's fourth-largest city, Hrazdan. Each offers a degree of leadership and political experience. Both were two of the more prominent 'political prisoners' during the 2008 post-election crackdown and arrest of opposition leaders and supporters (see [ARMENIA: Regime gives ground on March 2008 violence - July 6, 2009](#)). Each spent about two years in prison before the pardon that released all remaining opposition detainees.

Pashinyan

Impact

- The emergence of a new opposition force will pose an unexpected challenge to an already beleaguered government.
- The government has not reacted, perhaps distracted by other pressure or seeing the potential threat and opting not to make things worse.
- The most strident reaction has come from the opposition HAK, which rightly fears its own position may be threatened.

Emergence of new political force is particularly significant now, amid pronounced political instability and a surge of protests and activism

Pashinyan first rose to prominence as the long-time editor of the country's most popular and largest-circulation daily newspaper, the opposition Haykakan Zhamanak ('Armenian Times'). A highly intellectual politician, Pashinyan backed former President Levon Ter-Petrossian for the February 2008 president election and, bolstered by his investigative journalism, emerged as one of the most effective critics of incumbent President Serzh Sargsyan and his government. After being elected to parliament in the May 2012 elections, Pashinyan has become one of the more effective deputies, garnering significant visibility and broader appeal as one of the most determined critics and challengers of government policies.

However, with his emergence as one of the main leaders of the new Civil Contract, Pashinyan has now publicly broken away from the Armenian National Congress (HAK) bloc of Ter-Petrossian supporters in parliament.

Mikaelyan

In contrast to the more cerebral Pashinyan, the group's second dominant figure is much more of a 'street politician', having turned his prominence as a well-regarded veteran of the Nagorno-Karabakh war into a political career, serving as a popular mayor of an important Armenian city. Mikaelyan was one of the founding members of the ruling Republican Party of Armenia (HHK), although he resigned several years ago in protest against what he condemned as the "entrenched corruption" and "authoritarian tendencies" within the HHK. As both a war veteran and more of a populist than Pashinyan, Mikaelyan is regarded as a 'man of the people', which accords with his emotional and sometimes even crude political oratory.

Clearly, the pairing of these two strong, but very different political figures will broaden the group's appeal.

Pashinyan and Mikaelyan offer
new party contrasting
strengths

Some fresh faces

However, it is the diversity of the five other members of the group that is its most unusual feature -- an impressive departure for Armenia's traditionally conservative and closed political culture:

- Two are female civic activists, each with fairly extensive experience in the non-governmental organisation sector, who also bring the appeal of fresh faces in politics, both in terms of gender and age, as each is under 30.
- The remaining three board members are a young businessman who doubles as the editor of an electronic news website; a professor from the state university; and a long-time civic activist who has recently returned to Armenia after studying in the United States.

Thus, the diversity of the group represents an important bridge between the opposition and the country's newly empowered, but previously politically unaffiliated, youth activists (see ARMENIA: Government may crack down on civil society - November 13, 2013) -- as well as a crucial link to both academia and the small business community.

The new grouping's leadership
also has links with new
activism

A daunting challenge

Despite the fresh appeal, the challenge to compete successfully with a sitting Armenian government is daunting, especially given Armenia's record of tainted elections and reliance on the advantage of incumbency -- the so-called 'administrative resource' of state patronage. Civil Contract plans to hold its founding congress in the coming year; any move to form a fully fledged political party must overcome the obstacles of party organisation and financing, which have impeded previous attempts at forcing open the country's closed political system.

Yet with the impetus of the recent precedent of a peaceful transfer of power in neighbouring Georgia, the combination of fresh faces and innovative tactics may offer the Armenian voter a welcome alternative. With elections set for 2017 (parliamentary) and 2018 (presidential), there may be ample time for leveraging momentum and appeal into real political power.